

TIMOR LESTE: TWENTY YEARS OF FREEDOM, TWENTY YEARS OF SOLIDARITY



Twenty years ago, Timor Leste voted for freedom and independence.

Australian unions strongly supported the Timorese people throughout their journey towards independence, and took to the streets calling for international intervention in the tragic and bloody days that followed. Long before this historic vote, however, Australian unionists stood alongside the Timorese people in their struggle for freedom.

Australian unions were there to support the Timorese people get their message out to the world over the airwaves during the brutal twenty-four year occupation. And in the wake of the violent aftermath of the vote for independence, Australian unions were there to help rebuild essential services and infrastructure.

In the two decades since the referendum, union solidarity has continued through support for education, community media, vocational skills training, sustainable agricultural, and of course through union-building. Australian unionists have shown real and practical solidarity with the Timorese people in their courageous journey to rebuild their country after decades of colonisation and conflict.

Today, Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA continues to work with local partner organisations that build the power of Timorese communities to defend their interests, to fight for their rights, and to secure decent livelihoods.



Viva Timor Leste!



FIGHTING FOR WORKING WOMEN'S RIGHTS



For years, the women who work in the homes of Dili have been denied a decent wage, have had their rights ignored, and have not received the respect they deserve.

But domestic workers in Dili have been building a collective voice through the Working Women's Centre of Timor Leste, an organisation that is campaigning for legislative changes that would recognise the rights of domestic workers in Timor's labour laws.

By recognising the value of domestic workers in law, women workers will secure a living wage, receive overtime payments they are entitled to, be able to refuse to work overtime, and earn a full wage that is not undercut by board and lodging.

The Working Women's Centre of Timor Leste is also going beyond the door-to-door organising it was built on to reach out to working women through a telephone hotline to provide advice to women on their workplace rights.

In Timor Leste many workers have little knowledge of their workplace rights, and the widespread use of insecure and informal contracts means that workers struggle to enforce the nominal rights they do have in law.

But by distributing an easy guide to workplace rights and offering a hotline to guide workers through complaints processes, the Working Women's Centre of Timor Leste is helping women win workplace justice.





ORGANISING WORKERS AND TRAINING WORKPLACE LEADERS



Thanks to the practical expressions of solidarity from the Australian union movement, Timorese workers are organising in their workplaces to defend the right to decent wages, fair conditions, and safety in the workplace.

By training workplace delegates and organisers, Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA’s partner union, the General Workers Union (SJT-TL) is helping workers enforce the legislative protections they have fought for and won over the past two decades.

In 2012, Timorese workers had their rights recognised in the Labour Code, which sets strong standards of protection for wages and conditions. But in Timor Leste employers regularly flout the Labour Code and employees often have little knowledge of their rights, meaning that strong union workplaces are the only way for Timorese workers to secure their rights. By training around two hundred delegates each year, our partner union is strengthening workers’ rights workplace by workplace.

And when Timorese workers come to Australia on Seasonal Work Visas, the General Workers Union – with support from the NUW – are preparing them with the knowledge and skills they need to defend their rights from exploitative employers on Australian farms.

Timorese workers are not just defending what they have secured over the past twenty years of democracy, but they are demanding a dignified minimum wage, greater access to social security, stronger land rights and fair agrarian reform, and a full recognition of the rights of domestic workers. In the May Day March of 2019, Dili’s workers came together to demand their rights in the largest May Day rally Timor Leste has seen since independence.





STRENGTHENING RURAL FARMERS' UNIONS



In Timor Leste, the majority of the population live and work in rural farming regions. Small-scale family agriculture is the basis of the national economy, but farmers often struggle to increase their agricultural production and secure a reliable income.

An organised agricultural sector will help build stronger local economies and fight poverty in farming communities. Local development of the farming sector also provides sustainable alternatives to the high dependence on dwindling fossil-fuel resources in the Timor Sea.

To build stronger farming communities, APHEDA's three partner organisations Institutu Edukasaun Popular (IEP), Kdadalak Sulimutuk Institute (KSI) and Union Agrikultura de Ermera (UNAER), have come together to develop a program of farmer organising, popular education, and movement-building.

The establishment of district farmers' unions with community elected leadership provides both a political voice and a democratic process for collective decision making. The Timor Leste government is already consulting directly with these organisations as elected representatives of the farming community and requesting their involvement in decision making forums.

APHEDA also works with the Agricultural Union of Ermera to deliver a six-month training program on community leadership, activism and advocacy for young farmers. The training brings together practical skills with political education that allows students to step up into leadership roles locally.

